

Editorial

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The U.S. Senate has a reputation for being more "contemplative" than the U.S. House. It's also known for being the slow-poke of the two. Right now, hundreds of bills passed by the House await action in the Senate.

One that senators should quickly approve is the Plain Language Act, introduced by Iowa's Rep. Bruce Braley and recently passed by a wide margin in the House. The legislation requires the federal government to write all new documents in a "clear, concise, well-organized" manner.

The idea - imagine this - is people should be able to understand government documents on the first read.

There is a long history of efforts to use plain language in government, including a presidential memo issued by former President Bill Clinton. He presented "No Gobbledygook awards" monthly to federal workers who turned bureaucratic messages into wording people can easily understand.

Winners included those responsible for new over-the-counter drug labeling, clearer explanations about Social Security benefits and transforming information about why immigrants can be deported into a short, question-and-answer format.

Another example of plain language is the federally required label in sport utility vehicles warning drivers about the risk of rolling over. The original label was 77 words of black type. The new one is a few bullet points and pictures with bright colors. People might actually read it now.

Many government agencies have made improvements as the push for plain language has ebbed and flowed over the years. But if this legislation becomes law, all federal agencies will be required to use clear language.

"There's no reason why the federal government can't write these forms and other public documents in a way we can all understand," said Braley. It would help ensure Americans understand what the government is doing, which increases transparency, and saves everyone time. It also saves the government money when fewer people are calling with questions or making mistakes on forms.

Unclear communication from the government has long been a pet peeve of Braley's. As an attorney, one example he points to are the old instructions given to juries about the rules of the road in driving. Juries were told a driver must be able to stop a vehicle "with a reasonable degree of celerity."

Braley had to look up the word. So did we. It means "swiftness of movement."

The Senate should pass this legislation with a reasonable degree of celerity.

Better yet, lawmakers should do it quickly.